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## **"Long Cold Days": The Natural Ice Industry, 1880 to 1940**

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On January 20th, 1907 the ice fields of Des Moines were alive with ice harvesters. “Every available man was called into service, busily in the store houses filing ominous looking saws and dragging huge ice markers.” This scene was common all across not only Iowa and fellow Midwestern states, but in all places where it freezes in America. From Council Bluffs to Dubuque, Clear Lake to St. Louis, or Cedar Falls to Des Moines, natural ice was harvested from local bodies of water and used to refrigerate perishable goods for public consumption.

# “Long Cold Days”: The Natural Ice Industry, 1880 to 1940.

Andrew D. Olson-University of Northern Iowa

“Horses are as scarce as they are in the Subway, for power-driven machines have now taken their place.



Gas powered saw, ca. 1920, Cedar Falls, Iowa, courtesy Cedar Falls Historical Society: Instead of teams of horses, saws such as this one were used to cut the ice.



Ice House, ca. 1923, Cedar Falls, Iowa, courtesy Cedar Falls Historical Society: Currently the Cedar Falls Historical Society’s Ice House Museum, this structure measures 100 feet around and 30 feet high and is made of hollow clay tile for insulation. “With an army of 40 men at work, the ice goes into the storage house at the rate of 800 cakes an hour. Each cake weighs 300 pounds.”- From the Cedar Falls Record, 1927.



Ice Plant, 1940, Dubuque, Iowa, courtesy Iowa Public Television: By the late 40s most ice was manufactured in plants.



Ice harvest in Des Moines, 1907, Des Moines, Iowa, courtesy NewspaperArchives.com: The best thickness for ice to be cut at was 8 to 12 inches. Notice the spiked shoes worn to make movement on the ice easier.



Ice harvest on the Cedar River, ca. 1920, Cedar Falls, Iowa, courtesy Cedar Falls Historical Society: Harvesters would work quickly to keep the ice, and themselves, from freezing with their assortment of “bars”.

“Ice cutting was a cold job, but they hated to have it thaw because if the ice was put in when it was damp or wet it froze together.”- John Huckleberry of Dallas Center, Iowa.

Thousands of laborers would join in the arduous task of harvesting frozen water which was then stored in an “ice house,” which were typically just barns with increased insulation, drainage, and ventilation. Then during the hotter months the “iceman” would hitch his team of horses to his trusty wagon and deliver ice to almost every home in the community. Thousands of tons would be harvested, delivered, and ultimately melt.

“We used to trade in their old wood boxes. We sold them to the Amish or took them to the dump.”- Dick Young of Young Ice and Fuel Co., Waterloo, Iowa.

“Ice, of course, offers the most simple source.” -Iowa Homestead, 1919.



Ice box, ca. 1930, Cedar Falls, Iowa, courtesy Cedar Falls Historical Society:



Refrigerator, ca. 1940, Cedar Falls, Iowa, courtesy Cedar Falls Historical Society: Modern refrigeration was one of the leading factors to the demise of the natural ice industry.

Poster for the Iowa State Fair, 1906, Des Moines, Iowa, courtesy Iowa State Historical Society: Ice was vital but fickle due to its propensity to revert back to water. Consumers often wanted for a more efficient form of refrigeration.



“How would you like to be the ice man?”

An article titled “Be Kind To Iceman Is Caution” from the Cedar Falls Record in 1914 gives some tips to consumers when engaging with their local iceman:  
1. “Have the ice box open waiting for him”  
2. “Don’t engage him in conversation”  
3. “Be on hand to open the door and shut it after him”



Loading train cars at Lake Okabena, Minnesota ca. 1880s, courtesy HathiTrust Digital Library: Manpower, and the occasional team of horses, was the primary resource for the work done during an ice harvest.



Loading trucks at Lake Okabena, Minnesota 1915: Thirty years later and industrialization, while not changing the core steps of the process of ice harvesting, saw a drastic shift in how work was done.

Over the years industrialization would not drastically change the process of the natural ice harvest as horses and manpower were aided by technology. Eventually mechanical refrigeration, the rural electrification subsidies of the New Deal, consumers that demanded a more reliable product, and mild winters caused by the drought that occurred during the Great Depression led to the demise of the natural ice industry.